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ABSTRACT

Spanish culture units developed by the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese are described in this article. The design of modular culture units, intended to permit greater individualization of instruction, is discussed and illustrated with frequent reference to specific examples. Suggestions on how teachers can begin to prepare their own modular culture units with a minimal involvement of media are proposed. (RL)

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INDIVIDUALIZED MODULAR CULTURE UNITS--A NEW DIMENSION FOR SUMMER TRAVEL

The AATSP Culture Units were constructed to fill what we felt was a need IN THE United States for such materials, and the fact that they are booked far in advance has convinced us that this need exists. However, this does not blind us to the fact that for most language teachers there is a better way. With a little ingenuity and effort those who are not prevented from traveling abroad can prepare materials that will do an even better job because (1) they will be tailored to the teacher's individual talents and the needs of his students; (2) they will not have to be scheduled months in advance with the possibility that they may arrive at an inconvenient time; and (3) because they can be presented bit by bit at a psychologically appropriate moment. Let's discard once and for all the idea that culture should be taught from a special textbook on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The kind of culture we are talking about has little to do with buildings and monuments and consists more often of insights that can be given by a gesture or by a moment of explanation. It is the element which cements the language to the people who speak it and makes the whole thing come alive.

The effort to prepare your own cultural materials can add a whole new dimension to your summer of travel or study in a Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking country. Moreover, the by-products of such an effort may be equally as important as the final result, for as you concentrate on ways and means of interpreting what you see and feel, as you check your own impressions for accuracy, you find that you yourself see and hear and feel more. Some of your natural inhibitions are removed in your concern that your students be correctly informed, and you communicate more freely with a greater number of people. The benefits may well be linguistic as well as cultural.

The equipment that you need for such a project is minimal. First on my list would be a good camera, but one within the range of your skill as an operator. Take the time and trouble to know its limitations and learn to use it effectively

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before you set out. Technically poor pictures are a joy to no one. You will need a little money for realia, but it need not be a lot. The most significant realia is often the least expensive. Some people can also put a small tape recorder to most effective use. The most important ingredient of all, however, is a truly seeing eye and an open, inquiring mind which discards preconceptions and soaks up information. One must then coordinate and organize and reinforce what he has learned with visual and auditory proof. That is what culture units are all about!

How big is a culture unit? Not necessarily as big as a foot locker! I think the ideal culture unit is modular and completely flexible. It varies from one time of use to the next, depending on the age level and individual interests of the students, the points to be reinforced, and the circumstances of the presentation. It might consist of five or six slides to give substance to a burial scene in a story that is being read, or of eight or nine as background for an introduction to La Mancha; or it might consist of several periods devoted to showing craft products, slides depicting the processes involved and the craftsmen at work, and to discussion designed to build ethnic pride and to bring out the cultural differences inherent in a handicraft society as opposed to one based on advanced modern technology. Good culture units are modular in the best sense of the word because they are not static and fixed, but rather flexible and changing like the times we live in. They can be re-grouped to serve different purposes. This is the great advantage of your own culture units over those prepared by someone else. You have made the knowledge your own and can call on it at will. The materials are at hand and can be made to fit the need.

If culture units are so fluid and flexible, how can we arrive at a definition of what such a unit should be? Perhaps we can sneak up on it and determine what a culture unit is not:

(1) It is not a miscellaneous collection of unrelated pictures, however technically perfect.

(2) It is not bits of unrelated realia, no matter how handsome the objects may be individually.

The key word is "unit," so each group of slides or realia or tapes or combinations thereof must have something in common--some point of contact at which they reinforce and supplement each other so that some phase of the cultural heritage may be seen more completely and understood more fully. It need not--indeed never can--give all the answers. Rather it should motivate the student to greater interest and further research. To be truly effective it must be short enough or varied enough to avoid monotony and boredom. It should stimulate questions which lead discussion into the less graphic, more subtle and intangible elements of the cultural picture.

It is impossible to over-estimate the importance of the psychological approach and attitude of the teacher, both to the task of assembling cultural information and materials and to that of disseminating them to his students. Comparisons with our own cultural patterns are inevitable and probably not undesirable if they are properly handled. But if comparison has a place, value judgments do not. We in the United States are experiencing too many understanding gaps (generational, international, and otherwise) to try to impose our value system on other parts of the world. We must understand and help our students to understand that the countries we may visit or study are neither the offspring of nor an underdeveloped extension of our particular technological cultural system, but something which has grown from quite different roots. The result is an entirely different plant, as fascinating in its diversity from our system as in its similarities. The people nurtured under its influence are neither inferior nor odd. They are reacting as normally to their physical and psychological environment as we are to ours, and their actions are neither more nor less idiosyncratic than ours when viewed from the perspective of the other culture. If we should teach no lesson but this our time would not have been wasted!

This means, then, that we will not resort to the frequent and really indefensible practice of picking scenes for their shock value--of photographing slum areas and barefoot Indians exclusively because they are so "interesting". Nor

does it mean that the seamy side of life must be avoided entirely. The contrasts must be shown, but the contrasts must be within the country itself rather than by implied comparison with our economy of abundance. We must have enough integrity to paint a fair picture. Slums must be offset by wealthy residential districts; cottage industries by modern factories; barefooted Indians in hovels by chic young ladies in luxury hotels. They all exist, as well as much that is in between which must not be neglected either.

If we are to avoid the pitfall of the trivia of the "say-nothing" postcard-type pictures and miscellaneous souvenirs of the majority of tourists, what might be the modules into which our units could be organized? Suppose we start by considering the preoccupations of our students. Consciously or unconsciously I believe they are most interested in establishing their own identity and creating for themselves an individual lifestyle, often based on different principles from those which have characterized their parents' lives. How do they learn about such things and arrive at such decisions? They study people: the real people they know; their vicarious acquaintances via the news media, television, or sports spectacles; and the fictional characters they meet in their reading. This, then, is an opening wedge. Here is a quite different lifestyle which many people find more or less satisfying. Why shouldn't students be interested?

For a starter, then, let's concentrate on people--people of all ages and every economic condition. Let's show people doing things--everyday things like shopping in stores or markets or working in banks, or staring into a display window of wedding finery, or sauntering in the plaza, or leaving the church after a first communion, or having a party with musicians and dancing. Let's become acquainted with a family and photograph the children in school and with their friends, and the husband at his work, and the wife in the kitchen or directing the servants as the case may be. From these pictures and your explanations and your tapes of family conversations, or an interview with a student about student strikes or a young woman about women's

lib, your student can reconstruct a lifestyle. These Mexicans or Peruvians or Spaniards or Portuguese are no longer beings from a strange planet speaking a strange gibberish, but people with interests similar to yet different from his own who communicate easily with each other and with whom he might someday hope to exchange ideas.

With people as the infallible unifying factor, if you organize carefully even the more abstract concepts can emerge. A slide of a couple of boys grinning happily in a dune buggy stopped at a street light may not correspond to the traditional view of Mexican youth, but it can trigger a whole sociological lesson with many ramifications. "Are Mexican boys driving dune buggies the exception or the rule? Do Mexican boys generally have their own cars? Why not? Is it easy for a middle-class teen-age Mexican boy to find employment as boys do in this country? How is this affected by the general economic and employment situation? By his study schedule? By the class consciousness of his family? Why is there no girl in the car with the boys? What is the present status of boy-girl relationships in the provincial towns? To what extent and how fast is this changing? At what ages do young people marry? How does this compare with marriage ages in the United States? To what extent has the church structure in the two countries influenced social life? What is the historical reason for these different religious patterns? We could continue with one thing leading to another until we had touched on family life, social organization, transportation, the economic situation, the political structure, the educational development (and the historical roots of all of these), but I would not advise doing so. Small doses are best, and there will be other days and other slides and groups of slides to evoke similar cultural excursions into the more abstract. The point is, however, that simply showing a series of pictures is not enough: the commentary and, preferably, the questions and discussion it evokes convey much more than meets the eye.

It should be understood, therefore, that while we may choose (as we have done in the AATSP units) such general classifications as "childhood and birthdays,"

"courtship and marriage," "education," "recreation," and "religion, old age and death," this is entirely arbitrary. Your divisions can be as broad or as narrow as you wish, and as your time allows, but generally speaking let them have to do with life and people. Even a unit on arts and crafts should emphasize the part that real people play in these productions, and should help your students understand the effect that our throw-away economy and expensive hand repair work is having on the durability of the product and on pride of craftsmanship in this country.

In all fairness try to avoid the stereotypes such as the sleeping Mexican and the Spanish dancers with their castanets and the bull fight. Perhaps "avoid" is too strong a word. At least try to put them in reasonable perspective. A group of townspeople of all ages dressed in every-day clothes except for their alpargatas dancing the sardana in a Barcelona square may not be as colorful as a theatrical fandango, but it says a lot more that is significant about the life-style of the people.

When you think in terms of realia, don't overlook the obvious. The box or wrapping of a familiar brand of shampoo or toothpaste all in Spanish can be fascinating. A ticket from the new Mexico City subway or an overcrowded Lima bus can set off an illuminating discussion of transportational differences and their causes. Objects intimately involved with a different and more primitive way of life such as the spindle twirled by Indian women as they trot along Andean paths or the metate used for grinding corn are fine for pointing out class differences and the agricultural-economic base of a country. Forget about tourist items as as you go through an ordinary city market and concentrate on items such as the estropajo scouring pads or the carved chocolate beaters for which your students may not know the use. Don't forget that newspaper clippings are great for explaining different social customs and that magazines are available catering to a variety of interests. Lay in a supply.

Don't expect to devote a summer to a project of this kind and call it done. You can make great headway, but you'll never be done. As your own understanding of the countries with which you are most involved increases you will find yourself discarding props and slides along with your views. The factor of obsolescence is always there to plague you. On the other hand it is this very factor of constant change which makes each trip a new experience, and it is this sense of ever-changing reality which we must continue to convey to our students in ever-changing terms. This is the real challenge!

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